

second chance

What gives a first date every chance of turning into a second? Psychologist and online dating coach Bettina Arndt gives her guide to ensuring an encore performance.



The first date is easy: light, easy chatter, relaxed banter over who pays for the coffee, a peck on the cheek in the car park. But then comes the moment of suspense: will this be just another first date that goes nowhere? For many, a second date is elusive, even though many others take it for granted that their coffee companions will be lining up for a second shot.

Almost a third of people end up with a second date most of the time, according to new data from a survey of more than 3500 singles conducted by the online dating site RSVP (owned by Fairfax Media, *Sunday Life* publisher).

A similar proportion report getting that second date about half the time. And the rest? Well, they're stuck with endless first dates, with eight per cent reporting that sadly, they never get a second one.

After working as an online dating coach for the past four years, I find it easy to pick the clients who are always asked on follow-up dates. Like Janet, 53, from Melbourne: a willowy brunette who's clever, funny and happy to add a vital component for success in this age group – a saucy touch to her profile. One mention of a particular liking was enough: "A firm, warm hand resting casually on my thigh." She is swamped with men eager for as many dates as she'll offer them.

The men who do well are equally predictable. Tall, good-looking guys in any age group, successful men, confident blokes with good table manners and great banter. It's the men struggling to get those second dates who often come to me – accounting for about a third of my 250 or so past clients. Sometimes, the reason is obvious – men who are short, broke or boring are less likely to get repeat requests. Ditto women who lie on their profiles, or put up very old photos, or are really overweight.

The reality of online dating is that people will have more first dates than seconds. Well, they aren't really dates at all: you can't actually *date* someone you haven't even met. Online "dating" sites and apps simply offer a screening and connecting process, and access to a huge pool of prospects. It's only when you meet and discover a mutual attraction that you can go on a proper date.

It's far better to think of it as a "pre-romance" system which creates opportunities for romance to emerge down the track. People rarely click on that first meeting – we're all just too complex for that.

So there's no substitute for just getting out there and using this magical system

to meet lots and lots of people. It's a numbers game. Expecting lots of first meetings and very few second ones avoids the emotional upheaval of high hopes following by crushing blows. Yet there's plenty you can do to increase the odds of success.

Who is in your ballpark?

There's no point trying to get first dates with people you aren't likely to win over. So if you're a cuddly woman, don't bother trying for a first date with a trim, athletic man who would prefer a stick insect. However charming you are when you meet, it's highly improbable he'll want to see you again.

Don't play it cool

The man in my life – whom I met online two years ago – says he was won over by my obvious enthusiasm for him. By making it very clear I'd love to see him again, I became one of the rare women he chose to meet twice.

Too many people play it cool, not daring to show interest in case they're kicked to the kerb. But more often than not, showing you are eager will work for you. Playing hard-to-get may impress a few, but most people are relieved to meet someone who doesn't play games and is willing to be open about their feelings. And it never hurts to flirt a little – using long moments of eye

constantly checking your phone. "I'd never have a second date with a man who talks with his mouth full or waves his fork in the air," one woman told me. Add to the list treating waiters politely, and avoiding crude language. If the man offers to pay for the coffee or meal, the woman should happily suggest they split it and graciously thank him if he refuses.

On the don't-go-there list: talking endlessly about your ex, rubbishing other people you've met online, and grilling someone about their finances.

Wanting one who "makes you laugh"

"I've been out on 21 coffee dates but none that made me laugh," said Sandra, a 60-something Adelaide woman whose lively new profile is pulling them in. She's seeking a man who'll have her chortling over her espresso.

It's a big ask. Men are not performing seals and it's a tough call to come up with funny lines on first dates. It's rather like a woman expecting a man to "give" her orgasms – a sure recipe for disaster. Better to share the load and take responsibility themselves – and that includes creating lighter moments, so you can enjoy a chuckle together.

Me, me, me ...

What is it about people who talk and *talk* about themselves and never ask their dates about their lives?

It's a question I'm asked often by women about their first dates. So many men seemed determined to put on a display, preening their peacock feathers with endless talk about how they earn a crust or are perfecting their golf swing.

Part of the problem is that women are too good at asking questions and many men enjoy that attention. But successful suitors know to turn the tables. Nothing too intrusive, mind you: no cross-examinations – just showing genuine interest will win brownie points.

Cast a wider net

It pays to meet up with all sorts of possibilities, even if they don't tick all your boxes. Often, our shopping lists are far too long and we overlook unlikely souls who could actually enhance our lives. Don't search for The One. Know that there are good prospects out there who might offer you something different from what's worked for you before.

There's a 50-something Sydney town planner who's surprised to find herself thriving in a relationship with a builder she met online. This chatty, easygoing bloke is a refreshing change from the Alpha males she'd previously partnered – and comes with the added bonus that he's very, *very* good with his hands. •

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I have a 77-year-old male client who's just started online and is delighted to have been getting attention from women in their early 60s. I'm warning him to be careful: most women in that age group are wary of becoming "a nurse or a purse" to a much older man, so chances are these younger women are gold-diggers he needs to avoid. Everyone needs to get real and not waste time with first dates which are unlikely to lead to a real relationship.

Are you a seller or a buyer?

If you're the type of hot babe or cool bloke who ticks most prospects' boxes, you can use first meetings just to suss out whether you want a second course – chances are, they'll be keen on you without you having to work too hard to win them over.

But less obviously desirable men and women must realise *they are not in a buyers' market*. They can't afford to go armed with a checklist, cross-examining their dates to see if they come up to scratch. The first job at that meeting is to attract: to be warm, fun company so they'll want to see you again.

contact and occasional physical touch, like a brief stroke on the hand during the conversation.

The vital first impression

Women get *so* cheesed off when they dress up for a date and the man rolls up in daggy old shorts or trackie pants. Some older divorced men let themselves go when there's no partner to nag them to get their teeth fixed or shave off a scruffy beard. I often do a makeover with male clients, getting rid of comb-overs "hiding" balding crowns, replacing outdated glasses, or buying new clothes.

Women also make mistakes – like the Melbourne gym instructor who complained she only attracted sleazy men. Yet not only did her profile photos flaunt her amazing body, but she turned up on first dates in the shortest, tightest outfits imaginable. Fine if all she wanted was a roll in the cot, but attracting men who want real relationships requires dressing with more decorum.

Manners maketh the man or woman

Manners matter: like arriving on time, and paying your date proper attention rather than looking distracted and